



# BULLETIN

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## Russia's Violation of the INF Treaty: Consequences for NATO

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*Russia's violation of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty could have severe military and political implications for European security. In the immediate future, NATO members should demand that Moscow answer accusations about non-compliance. Simultaneously, they should prepare options for strengthening NATO deterrence and defence capabilities in case Russia starts to introduce the prohibited missiles into its military forces.*

The 1987 INF Treaty is a unique Cold War disarmament agreement that banned an entire category of U.S. and Soviet Union arms—ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of 500–5,500 km. By reducing the risk of an out-of-the blue nuclear attack, the treaty has become one of the cornerstones of military stability and predictability in Europe.

The findings of a U.S. Department of State report published on 29 July 2014, that Russia violates the pact, further exacerbate concerns about its long term viability. Russia has been signalling the possibility of withdrawing from the treaty since 2005. It has underlined its discriminatory nature as a growing number of countries, including China, have built-up their missiles inventories, against which Russia cannot respond in kind. Russia's efforts to make the INF Treaty global ended in fiasco. Apart from that, Russia has viewed treaty withdrawal as a possible countermeasure to the development of a U.S. missile defence system in Europe. Russia still remains a party to the treaty, mainly because of concerns about the reaction of the U.S., but especially of European and Asian countries, to which missiles with a range of less than 5,500 km primarily pose an increased direct threat. In the case of the U.S., such missiles can increase the direct threat to Alaska and military forces deployed in the territories of European and Asian allies.

It is likely that, in order to avoid the repercussions of withdrawal, Russia has concluded that it is more profitable to violate or circumvent the INF Treaty in a clandestine manner. The U.S. has been suspicious about Russia's conduct since at least 2011. The recent publication of the United States' strong accusations was influenced by a drastic deterioration of its relationship with Russia, in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Pressure from Republican congressmen on the U.S. administration could also be a factor. Also, it should not be excluded that the U.S. could not delay its reaction any longer, as Russia might be on the verge of a gradual deployment of missiles banned by the treaty.

**Russia's Suspected Missiles.** The U.S. has stressed unequivocally that Russia violates its obligations not to possess, produce, or flight-test a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) with a range of 500 km to 5,500 km, or to possess or produce launchers for such missiles. The United States does not provide any more details on the missile or on the exact nature of the violation. According to unofficial assessments, it could be the R-500 cruise missile, which uses the same launcher as the Iskander ballistic missiles. It is estimated that it may have a range of up to 3,000 km and can carry both conventional and nuclear payloads. However, U.S. concerns may have been raised by a totally different GLCM.

Although it is not a part of the United States' official complaint, there are also doubts about whether some of Russia's ballistic missiles are consistent with the INF Treaty. Russia is suspected of circumventing the treaty by developing the RS-26 Rubez ballistic missile. This is formally an intercontinental range ballistic missile (ICBM) and is constrained by limitations and verification mechanisms of the New START Treaty. It is, however, speculated that it is designed primarily for delivering multiple warheads at a distance shorter than 5,500 km. It is questionable whether the RS-26,

armed with multiple warheads, is able to reach targets at intercontinental range. Deliberate circumvention of the INF Treaty would, however, be difficult to prove. Neither the INF nor the New START treaties prohibit testing ICBMs at shorter ranges. The other missile that creates concern is the currently deployed Iskander-M. Even though its official range is less than 500 km, its technical parameters indicate that it can reach targets at greater distances. Still, as long as Russia does not flight-test the missile beyond the official range, there are no grounds for accusing Russia that the missile breaches the INF Treaty.

**The Level of Threat to Europe.** No matter whether Russia breaches the INF Treaty, all NATO allies can be targeted by Russia's ICBMs, which are technically able to deliver warheads at shorter ranges. Apart from that, Russia possesses other nuclear weapons that could be used against Europe, and which are not covered by the INF Treaty, including air-launched cruise missiles with a range of 3,000 km. Poland and the Baltic States take into account that even the 500 km range Iskander-M makes Russia capable of striking almost their entire territories, including critical military installations such as airfields, sea ports, and command centres. Iskander-M missiles are based in Luga, close to the Estonian border. Even if they are not currently based in Kaliningrad Oblast, they might be transported there quickly by aircraft. Belarusian territory can be also used as a missile launch-pad.

Violation or circumvention of the INF Treaty has a primarily psychological impact. It demonstrates that Russia strives to acquire diverse and tested options for a missile strike against Europe. The direct missile threat to different European countries would depend on the number, range and deployment location of missiles. For example, deployment of 1,000 km range missiles in Luga would allow Russia to deliver nuclear or conventional strikes on Poland without the need for using the Kaliningrad Oblast. A 2,000 km range missile would reach the entire German territory, and 3,000 km would cover all European NATO members except Portugal. The credibility of the Russian nuclear missile threat to the whole of Europe would be strengthened by RS-26 missiles.

A diversified missile arsenal broadens Russia's options for intimidating Europe. In a hypothetical confrontation with a NATO member, tests of nuclear capable missiles, or their use for limited conventional strikes, can signal a growing risk of nuclear escalation. It could, for example, be exploited in a scenario in which Russia creates a fait accompli in Central Europe and tries to deter other NATO members from sending reinforcements. Apart from the intimidation/deterrence value, Russia may also use its missiles as an effective war-fighting tool. This applies to conventionally-armed missiles, as the threshold for using them is lower for nuclear-armed weapons.

Russia's missiles can be seen as a countermeasure to U.S. missile defence plans. They provide additional pre-emptive strike options against U.S. installations in Romania, Poland, and Alaska. For example, deployment of 700 km range missiles in the annexed Crimea would enable Russia to strike the Deveselu base in Romania without the need for missile deployment in Transnistria. Additionally, Russia may try to use its missiles as leverage in efforts to make the U.S. agree on legally binding constraints of its system. It might calculate that some NATO allies would be willing to pressure the U.S. to limit its system, in exchange for a reduction of Russia's missiles threatening Europe.

**Challenges for NATO.** Apart from its military and political implications, the INF Treaty violation is the final stage in Russia's dismantling military predictability in Europe. It adds to the uncertainty resulting from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the lack of a functioning conventional arms control mechanism, the limits of existing confidence-building measures such as the Vienna Document 2011, and a lack of transparency on non-strategic nuclear weapons.

There is a need for a firm U.S. response, in close consultation with NATO allies. Primarily, the U.S. should focus on resolving all concerns through bilateral dialogue with Russia, and through the Special Verification Commission envisioned by the INF Treaty. A strong call for Russia to explain U.S. accusations and to return to full-compliance with the treaty should be included in the Newport Summit final Declaration. Simultaneously, NATO should start preparing a set of different measures to tailor its deterrence and defence posture in case Russia gradually deploys missiles incompatible with the INF Treaty, and has a wide range of options including build-up of sea, air and ground-launched missile capability, and adapting a joint missile defence system to defend against limited missile strikes from the East.

In the longer term, the exact nature of a response would depend on the scale of Russia's actions and NATO's readiness to make and implement decisions that would be financially and politically costly. To make it more difficult for NATO allies to reach a consensus on the appropriate response, Russia could continue to negate any accusations. To dissuade allies from taking significant steps, it may threaten to openly withdraw from the treaty and to expand its missile arsenal radically. Additionally, the process of finding an appropriate response would be complicated by the fact that Russia's missiles could be presented as a response to Moscow's growing, yet unspoken concerns about China's expanding military capabilities.

For Poland, INF Treaty violation necessitates a cohesive NATO reaction. It also shows the important role of NATO's nuclear deterrence policy, including the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, which provide an option of a visible, joint response against hypothetical nuclear blackmail. Poland could be further assured by a greater presence in its territory of allied forces and NATO preparedness to provide reinforcements even during high intensity conflicts. The uncertain future relevance of the INF Treaty confirms that the modernisation of Poland's armed forces, including the planned acquisition of an air and missile defence system and air launched JASSM cruise missiles, is moving in the right direction.